



September 2018

Great Books and Critical Literacy: Similarities and Possibilities

Crystal Spring

Research Assistant, Johns Hopkins School of Education

A growing body of research suggests that a content-rich curriculum, defined as instruction that prioritizes the acquisition of knowledge as much as skills, drives students' academic success and narrows persistent achievement gaps.¹ In math and science, the acquisition of concrete knowledge (such as the first law of thermodynamics or the necessity of understanding fractions) is not, fundamentally, contested.² When it comes to translating this research into an English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum, however, the disagreements begin: which texts should students read? For what reasons? What does it mean for a piece of fiction to be considered content-rich?

There are numerous ways to approach these questions. In this piece, I want to set out two powerful conceptual frameworks that are often juxtaposed as oppositional, and to suggest that they be used in tandem in the real world of an ELA classroom. These frameworks represent, broadly speaking, the Great Books tradition and critical pedagogy.

The Great Books approach assumes that historically canonical literature contains wisdom and knowledge that benefits each new generation. The Great Books Academy, a home-school program for preschool- to 12th grade, maintains "that a genuine liberal education requires a study of the greatest books in the Western tradition, ordered not only in its method, but also toward realizing human happiness and wisdom."³ Those who have defended this educational stance have often blamed "squash-you-all-flat postmodernism" for diminishing "the real deal" of Great Books.⁴ Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, works to expose ideologies inherent in school structures and curricula, and as such resists the idea of a stable literary canon out of hand. A recent *Chicago Tribune* article⁵ highlights a teacher-led project called Disrupt Texts, which works "to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum" and "to aid...teachers committed to anti-racist/anti-bias teaching pedagogy and practices."⁶ Disrupt Texts assumes that the traditional canon contributes to exclusion, inequity, and racism.

Given this animosity, the question remain whether the traditional canon itself is tenable (let alone desirable) in today's classroom. The extreme ends of the spectrum, however, miss a vital point:

¹ "Hiding in Plain Sight: Leveraging Curriculum to Improve Student Learning," *Chiefs for Change*, August 10, 2017.

² Except, perhaps, in the method of approaching such concepts or the proper grade level in which to require them.

³ "About," *Great Books Academy*, greatbooksacademy.org/faqs/about/ accessed August 1, 2018.

⁴ David Clemens, "Great Books 2.0", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 19, 2009.

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Great-Books-20/44262>

⁵ John Warner, "Is 'The Great Gatsby' Really Required Reading? Disrupt Texts Challenges Teachers to Reconsider the Classics," *Chicago Tribune*, July 18, 2018, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/books/ct-books-biblioracle-0722-story.html>

⁶ Ebarvia, Tricia et al. "What is #Disrupt Texts?", *DisruptTexts*, accessed August 1, 2018, <https://disrupttexts.org>.

the values and pedagogical objectives articulated by intellectual leaders from both viewpoints are more alike than different.

Below, I examine the Great Books tradition (henceforth, “Great Books”) as articulated by Mortimer Adler, and critical literacy as articulated by Paolo Freire.⁷ Adler and Freire—portrayed here as representative theorists of the two intellectual currents—convey remarkably similar educational visions. I suggest that Great Books and critical pedagogy are not mutually exclusive, and that we can partner them in pursuit of a content-rich ELA curriculum.

Overview: Mortimer Adler and Paolo Freire

Mortimer Adler, a prominent mid-20th century American philosopher and educator, argued that a truly democratic American society—one characterized by intelligent citizenry who lead decent and enriched human lives—is best achieved by training citizens in the great books of Western civilization.⁸ Adler wanted Great Books not only to transform K-12 education but also to elevate thought and dialogue among adult citizens. His practical efforts included a K-12 educational reform plan called *The Paideia Proposal*, Great Books discussions groups for adults around the country, and a 54-volume Encyclopedia Britannica series called *Great Books of the Western World*.

Rather than an adulatory narrative of Western civilization or explicit instruction in its values, however, his Great Books “training” was to be “concerned primarily with the discussion of the great ideas and issues to be found in those books”⁹ and designed to “develop basic intellectual skills—the skills of critical reading, attentive listening, precise speech, and, above all, reflective thought.”¹⁰ He took care not to glorify the past per se. Adler’s defense of canonicity rested upon his conviction that the human experience changes little through time, and that “if the great works of literature...touch upon the permanent moral problems of mankind...then the great books of ancient and medieval as well as modern times are a repository of knowledge and wisdom, a tradition of culture which must initiate each new generation.”¹¹ Did he consider this list to be fixed? Not entirely. Adler believed that new texts could enter the canon as long as they satisfied the requirements of withstanding the test of time, attracting large readership, and “rais[ing] the persistent unanswerable questions,”¹² among other criteria.

Paolo Freire, on the other hand, argued for institution-defying critical pedagogy that resisted oppressive social structures and discourses through awareness and community participation. A Brazilian educator heavily influenced by his experiences with peasants, Freire virtually founded the critical literacy movement through his 1970 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which is still widely read in education circles.

⁷ Radical postmodernism is widespread in university humanities departments, but less so in K-12, where the key focus has been on diversity and cultural relevance.

⁸ Mortimer Adler, *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind*, ed. Geraldine Van Doren (Macmillan, 1990).

⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

The traditional education system, Freire argued, inevitably diminished the working class by leading them to internalize inferiority and remain illiterate. Therefore, not only the typical materials but also the traditional pedagogy should be discarded. Instead, Freire called for new texts that would help the marginalized recognize and resist alienating beliefs and practices. And he considered teachers and students to be equal co-investigators; he derided the “banking” analog of education in which teachers appear as depositors of knowledge, students as mere depositories.

But Freire did not reject canonical literature out of hand. Indeed, he argued that resistance to oppression was not possible without the ability to read the core texts (broadly construed) that animate specific societies. Whereas Adler might have bid students read *The Federalist Papers* for their ability to raise important questions about human beings and the just society, for instance, Freire would have commended them on different grounds. For Freire, *The Federalist Papers* might have offered an analytic window into the alienating power structures that wise students could ultimately subvert for democratic ends.

It may appear at first blush that Freire’s and Adler’s educational visions are incompatible. Indeed, several influential scholars have cited Freire in their opposition to Great Books programs and to the idea of canonicity.¹³ Likewise, the charge that critical theory has poisoned the liberal arts with moral relativism is a fairly common one in traditional circles.¹⁴ However, when we investigate the instincts and pedagogical approaches that Adler and Freire advocate, we find foundational similarities that could anchor the two in a partnership.

Democracy

First, Great Books and critical literacy reflect a fierce commitment to equal access to a high-quality education in the service of a shared, egalitarian community. Freire saw that the Brazilian poor suffered from a “culture of silence” and apathy that had been propagated by the national education system. Freire rejected the idea that authentic education and political participation should be reserved for the elite, arguing instead that schools should build upon students’ indigenous languages and local circumstances as the basis for developing curricula. Instead of having a predetermined list of texts, Freire held, the teachers should dialogue with students to identify a concrete issue in their lives, and then select materials that investigate the issue. This would lead, Freire envisioned, to a new community of students and adults—a true democracy—that would upend the status quo and restore human dignity.

Adler’s belief in universally edifying texts clearly differs from Freire’s approach. However, Adler similarly rejects the “tracking” of students into college-bound and vocational programs, stating that “the quality of schooling given the non-college-bound does not prepare them for citizenship or for a life enriched by continued learning,” labeling such a system “fundamentally antidemocratic.”¹⁵ He repeats throughout his writings and lectures that the best education for the elite must be the best education for all. Similar to Freire’s focus on liberating not only youth but also impoverished adults, Adler insists that Great Books educations should extend to adult education and lifelong learning

¹³ George Gugelberger, “Decolonizing the Canon: Considerations of Third World Literature,” *New Literary History* 22, no. 3 (1991); C. H. Knoblauch, “Some Observations on Freire’s ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed,’” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 8, no. 1 (1988): 50-54; Alan Harris, “The Impossibility of a Core Curriculum,” *Oxford Review of Education* 3, no. 2 (1977): 171-180.

¹⁴ Megan Keller, “Postmodernism Poisons the Liberal Arts,” *Claremont Independent*, March 9, 2018, <https://claremontindependent.com/postmodernism-poisons-the-liberal-arts/>

¹⁵ Adler, xxv.

through discussion groups. Both Freire and Adler recognized that democracy demands universal education in the highest levels of thinking, and that such universality must not be limited by social class, occupation, or age.

Furthermore, both Freire and Adler promoted an ongoing critique of social norms, insisting that examining justice, power, and authority be a universal outcome of democratic education. Freire employs the term *conscientizacao*, or conscientization, to describe the “process of developing a critical awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action.”¹⁶ As opposed to the naïve thinker, who “sees historical time as...a stratification of the acquisitions and experiences of the past,”¹⁷ the critical thinker questions the stability of historical narratives and rejects taking the socially normal for granted. For Freire, the stakes of thinking critically as a society are humanization and liberation from oppression. Democracy is simply incompatible with citizens who are naïve thinkers; “to glorify democracy and to silence the people is a farce.”¹⁸

This concept of conscientization resonates remarkably well with Adler’s conception of a lifelong education of “above all, reflective thought.”¹⁹ Similar to Freire’s refusal to take for granted society’s norms and assumptions, Adler emphasizes that citizens must “submit to the examination of reason...every human doctrine or policy.”²⁰ He argues that if a country’s students cannot reason for themselves the best form of government, “if their ‘faith’ in democracy amounts to nothing more than well-disposed feelings at the moment, change of circumstances may alter the direction of their sentiments and they may find themselves with a faith in fascism or the same thing by another name.”²¹ The stakes of thinking critically, for both Freire and Adler, are freedom from tyranny and true citizenship.

The objectives of critical literacy and Great Books are both driven by a vision of democratic society in which all members have the critical skills to determine what kind of society they want to live in, and what kind of citizen they want to be. Although critical literacy places greater emphasis upon translating intellectual freedom into community-based action, both critical literacy and the Great Books approach strive toward the same end.

Pedagogy

Educators are often trained to structure curricula to help students master “low-level” thinking skills in Bloom’s taxonomy, such as defining and memorizing, before tackling “higher-level” ones, such as evaluating and synthesizing. Such scaffolding approaches are ubiquitous in the Common Core standards (e.g. “a staircase of increasing text complexity”), and building on prior knowledge and skills is a mainstay of pedagogical practice.

Critical and Great Books educators would add, however, that tackling the *highest-order* questions about society and humanity is also crucial at all ages and in all curricula. For Freire and Adler, study should be guided by expansive and universally thought-provoking questions—or what Freire terms “generative themes” and Adler, “Great Ideas.”

¹⁶ “Concepts Used by Paulo Freire,” *The Freire Institute*, accessed August 1, 2018, <http://www.freire.org/paulo-freire/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>.

¹⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. M. B. Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970), 92.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁹ Adler, xxxi.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

Freire claims that if people are to become fully human, education must prioritize critical reflection upon generative themes. He argues that epochs of time are characterized by “a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites.”²² He states that each period of human history contains “themes of a universal character”²³ and identifies domination and liberation as the fundamental themes of *his* epoch. The task of education at *this* time, in his view, was to investigate how to bring the dialectic of domination and liberation into balance. For Freire, education should always be an investigation of the highest order—an “investigation...among people together seeking out reality.”²⁴

Like Freire, Adler asserts that education must prioritize the big questions—the “fundamental ideas that no century has outlived and the perennial issues that no century can avoid.”²⁵ While Freire emphasizes one dialectic as particularly prominent in each epoch, Adler highlights the constancy of the Great Ideas—a list of 102 terms that have preoccupied every human civilization. Adler would likely disagree with Freire’s emphasis upon one dialectic at a time, but Adler’s list does include synonymous terms for domination and liberation: slavery and liberty. Rather than conceptualizing education as a way to gain limited pieces of knowledge and skills, both Freire and Adler support pedagogy that makes explicit the thematic building blocks that pervade human life and society.

In addition to advocating for highest-order thinking at every level of education, Freire and Adler both recommend a dialogical style of pedagogy to resist traditional forms of transmission or replication pedagogy, which Freire famously labels the “banking” method. Freire instead promotes what he calls the “problem-posing method,” which he describes as “dialogical *par excellence*,” in which students and teachers together identify, nuance, and explore the generative themes that arise from scrutiny of their communities and epochs.²⁶ Adler also rejects the “banking model,” arguing that “lectures and textbooks are taboo...because [they] are usually deductive or analytical expositions...rather than dialectical inquiries adapted to the order of discovery.”²⁷ He envisions a similar pedagogy to Freire’s problem-posing method but classifies it as the Socratic method, in which teachers and students together are “actively engaged in discovery of the truth.”²⁸ He clarifies that teachers should never assume that timeless truths are simply inherent in texts because “a plurality of errors is always to be found for every single truth.”²⁹ The objective of the Socratic method, he says, is to work together to discover through reason—rather than through faith in Western civilization or didactic instruction—truths and their accompanying errors. For both Freire and Adler, communal interrogation of society and texts is the only way to truth.

Normative goods

The most fundamental trait that critical literacy and Great Books share is that they stand firmly against moral relativism. Although critical educators do not often explicitly associate themselves with positive values, choosing to focus instead on disrupting hegemonic institutions and

²² Freire, 101.

²³ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁵ Adler, 333.

²⁶ Freire, 109.

²⁷ Adler, 190.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

practices, their work is grounded in a belief that justice exists, and that citizens have a moral responsibility to work towards it.

Freire makes claims reminiscent of Aristotelian principles: that dehumanization is a “distortion of being fully human,” and that the goal of critical education is to work towards recovering lost humanity.³⁰ Such a vision for critical literacy assumes that there is a right way to be human—not impoverished, not oppressed, not a cog in a capitalist machine. Freire insists: “Although an attitude of critical doubt is legitimate, it does appear possible to verify the reality of the generative theme.”³¹ Critical literacy responds to real injustices and thus possesses positive goals and moral groundings.

Great Books programs also insist that, although doses of skepticism and inquiry are crucial to productive dialogue, education must strive for objective truth. Education should make students, Adler claims, consider “what is good and bad, to define the ideals or norms of human life.”³² He argues that the proximate ends of education are the moral and intellectual virtues, and that the ultimate end of education is happiness or a good human life.³³ Like Freire, Adler assumes that there is a right way to be human, and that education should facilitate the humanization of all.

Possibilities

Critical literacy, a standard stance of English educators today, and Great Books, an approach often portrayed as incompatible with cultural responsiveness, share many fundamental dispositions. As ELA educators continue to work towards the goal of content-rich curricula that facilitate genuine learning, they might consider coupling the two approaches in order to engage students in fundamental questions about self and society as well as community action.

One way for a joint praxis could be for educators to use Great Books texts as the first step towards effective community activism. Teachers and students might read *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, to explore the multifaceted effects of hypocritical social norms, and formulate ways to expose such hypocrisy in contemporary society. Conversely, educators could begin with a Freirean “problem-posing” method to identify a social issue and work with students to identify and read a Great Book that might enrich their thinking about solutions to the issue.

Partnership between critical literacy and Great Books would require nuancing the harder edges of Freirean and Adlerian thought. Adler’s reliance on a text’s longevity to determine its status as a Great Book is problematic; Freire’s resistance to any form of teacher authority in classrooms is unpractical. Working to rejuvenate these frameworks as an alliance, however, may very well pay off as districts and schools continue to seek content-rich curricula that can respond to our society’s educational conundrums.

³⁰ Freire, 43.

³¹ Ibid., 97.

³² Adler, 41.

³³ Ibid., 60.